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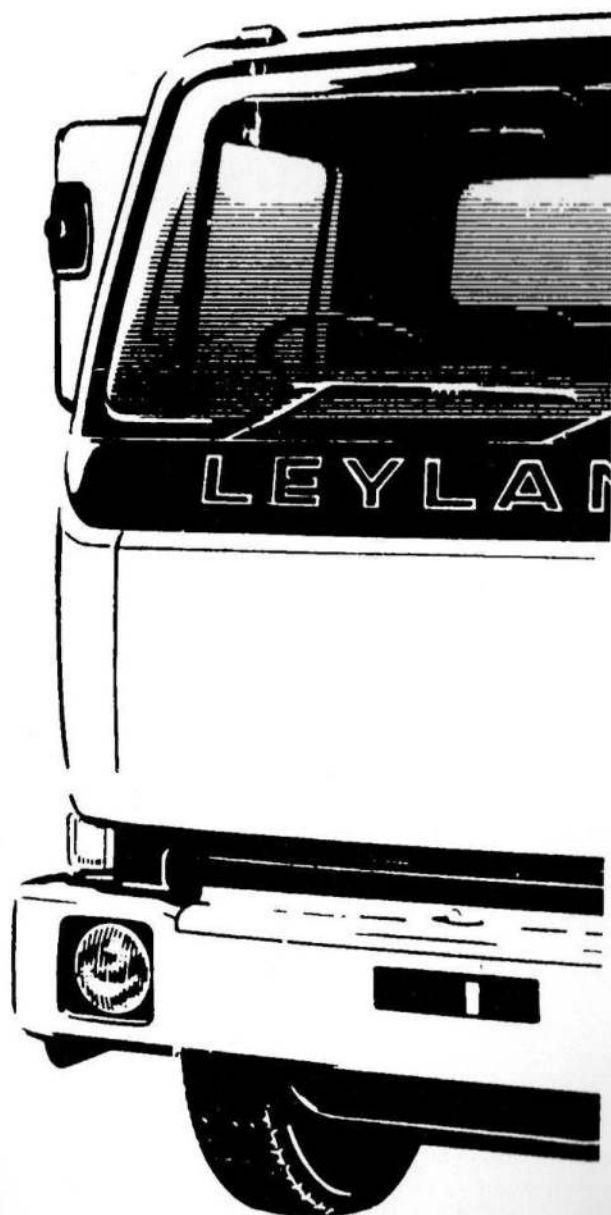
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**Keith Atkinson testimonial review.
Reflections of a sporting life.**

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KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 2



**KEITH ATKINSON
OLDHAM RUGBY LEAGUE CLUB**

BENEFIT YEAR 1992-93

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Over the next 12 months it is my job to see that Keith Atkinson's benefit year is a great success.

As chairman of a hardworking committee, I shall endeavour to make sure that each and every function, large and small, is efficiently and properly organised.

Whether it is a dinner, race night, golf day or the benefit game against Leigh, we guarantee all of you who support us full value for money and great entertainment. Keith, as all local Rugby fans are aware, has suffered numerous injuries — some small, others more serious — giving his best for Oldham RLFC.

He was possibly not as naturally gifted as some professional rugby league players but he has more than made up for his shortcomings by sheer determination and pure effort.

Whatever the game, whoever the opposition, it made little difference to Keith. He just went out and simply did his best.

Now you have the chance to say thank you and help raise as much money as possible to help Keith and his family invest in their future.

Personally I think it is a very worthy cause for a benefit year. That's why my committee colleagues and myself are happy to donate our time and effort to make it work for Keith.

Please do the same in Keith's year of opportunity.

Jim Fletcher

KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 3

*Best Wishes to Keith.
Here's to the next Ten Years!*

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Breaking free against Featherstone Rovers.

Keith Atkinson is, without question, one of the unluckiest rugby league players to have ever pulled on one of the famous Oldham Rugby League red and white jerseys — if not the unluckiest throughout the club's long and distinguished history stretching over 100 years.

Few Roughyed fans would be able to argue that this rough, rugged, hard tackling, uncompromising centre, who turned himself into a forward once his speed had gone, fully deserves his Testimonial one year early because he has never given less than 100% for the Watersheddings club.

Now, at the age of 27, Keith can take time out to review his career that epitomises the ups and downs of a sporting life in the world of professional rugby league.

He can reflect on those early days that were full of promise when as a youngster he was capped by both his county and his country, alongside fellow players who today are regulars in the GB International squad. Alas this vast potential has been cruelly undermined by a spate of wicked injuries that would have deterred even the most dedicated, determined sportsman.

MORE COMEBACKS THAN SINATRA

Many professionals would retired if they had suffered half the injuries Keith has had to endure. Keith, however, is made of sterner stuff. He has made more comebacks than **Frank Sinatra** and is happy to continue to do things his way.

His latest injury, a smashed forearm picked up midway through last season, is on the mend and the 27 year old is planning to return to full fitness to play in his testimonial match against Leigh this August.

If his return to action is successful he will be looking forward to a sustained spell free of injuries so he can help Oldham return to the first division, where he thinks they rightly belong.

Given that Keith's undying love of all things Oldham is famous with followers of the club, it is a surprise to find that he isn't even originally from the town.

A Sagittarius, he was born in Wegberg, Germany, on 15 December 1964. His father, Tony Atkinson, was an RAF aircraft engineer, who had joined the services in 1957. Whilst in the services he had married wife Doreen, who was also in the RAF. Keith was the second of three children. His elder sister is Michelle, 30, who lives near Watersheddings with her husband and two children, and his smaller brother, Stephen, a professional bunji jumper, who lives in Denmark and performs his daredevil acts at festivals and carnivals throughout Europe.

After Germany and the RAF, Tony, Doreen and their young family moved back to the UK to Ipswich. They spent two years there before moving to Macclesfield when Tony started a job as a chief aircraft engineer at Manchester Airport.

In Macclesfield the couple divorced and Doreen moved to Oldham where her sister, Irene, and mother lived. Keith, at the time, was eight years of age and went to Littlemoor Junior School, near Watersheddings.

Even at that tender age Keith was already in love with sport.

Impressing his teachers, he was picked for the junior school town team at the age of nine when the other children were between ten and eleven. He first came into contact with fellow players who would figure in his later career. He literally bumped into the likes of Richard Russell, Michael Ford, Ian Sherratt and footballer Andy Barlow at this level.

FOND EARLY MEMORIES

Keith has fond memories of those early formative years.

"Even though we were very young, the characteristics of people like Mike Ford, Chas and Richard Russell have never changed. Fordy was as cheeky then as he is now while Ian Sherratt still dwarfed everyone on the side at 11."

After moving up to senior school Keith joined Breezehill Comprehensive, a choice of school heavily influenced by the fact that the school had the best sports track record in Oldham.

ALWAYS LOOKS ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE

BY ROGER HALSTEAD
(OLDHAM CHRONICLE RUGBY LEAGUE WRITER)

Few commentators are better placed to review Keith Atkinson's contribution to Oldham RLFC than journalist Roger Halstead, who has reported on the club in the Oldham Evening Chronicle for over a quarter of a century. Here's his on a player who is always newsworthy, whatever he does!

Few Rugby League players have had to suffer so many serious injuries as Keith Atkinson and there is no doubt in my mind that, but for his cruel luck, he would have figured in many more than his 82 senior games.

I first came across him in the 1980-81 season when, as a 17 year-old, he was playing as a goalkicking centre in the Oldham Colts side.

He always had some talent and terrific enthusiasm for the game and it was a great day for him, on November 30, 1982 when he was one of only two amateurs to be named in the Great Britain Colts side to play the French in Apt.

He earned the call-up on the strength of a hard-tackling display against Yorkshire Colts at Barrow the previous weekend.

Another Oldham lad, Harry Maher, was among five players who made up the 21-man squad.

It is interesting to recall some of the players who were in the squad; Conway of Leeds, Clark of Hull KR, Crooks of Hull, Forber of St Helens, England of Castleford and Platt of St Helens.

I flew to France with the British party and we soon saw that the young Keith could be just as comical off the pitch as he was deadly serious on it.

Brian Gartland was a member of the British coaching panel and as soon as Keith detected just a little bit of apprehension at flying on Brian's part, he made the most of the situation to create some fun.

Later on in his Oldham career, it was Keith himself who was at the butt end of his team mates laughs, particularly on the Oldham Club's pre-season trip to the South of France in 1991.

On the way out we stopped at a roadside cafe in Northern France. Imagine the fun Keith had poked at him when he got back on the bus only to remember, with horror, that he had left a dental plate in the cafe.

With arms waving, and in as much schoolboy French as he could recall, he had to make the cafe proprietors understand that he had lost his teeth!

They were nowhere to be seen. Then the waitress had a brainwave, perhaps they had been cleared off the table with the litter and had ended up in the garbage bag.

It was a panic-stricken Keith who went in search of his dentures amongst the rubbish-and there they were!

That was not to be the last time that Atky held up the party during an eventful trip.

On the way home we played a match at Villeneuve-sur-Lot, but for the intervention of the local gendarmerie, Keith might still have been in France now.

After the match he went in search of a telephone to call home.

For the first and only time on the trip, nobody did a head count before the bus pulled out and we had been on the road for ten minutes or so when, in his rear mirror, our driver noticed a police car in hot pursuit with lights flashing and sirens blazing.

Even then no one on the team bus realised that Atky was missing.

The driver had a fit when the French police waved him into the side of the road...and then out of the car popped Atky wondering why we had left him (or words to that effect!)



KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 6

Incidents of that nature ensured Atky was always top of the pops during his years at Watersheddings, but it was a hard slog for the man who realised a lifetime's ambition by turning pro for his home-town club as a 19 year old in August 1984.

"I'm stunned" he said at the time.

"I feel like a soccer-mad lad who has signed for Manchester United. I used to dream of the day when I would play for them".

He thought he might have signed after playing for Great Britain Colts two years earlier, but a loss of confidence and the first of numerous injuries delayed his big day.

"I began to think I would never get the chance to turn pro and to walk away from the Club after all this time would have cut me up," said Keith at the time.

"Then Brian Gartland had a long talk with me last season and my confidence began to return. I still can't believe it's happening. It means so much to me."

Sadly, Keith was never able to fulfil his potential because one injury setback followed another.

I always believed him to be, potentially, the best and most consistent goalkicker on the books, but there were too many occasions when he was laid up at home or in a hospital bed instead of getting the fans roaring out on the pitch.

Incredibly, Atky is still playing after twice breaking his right leg, smashing his right ankle, fracturing each of his thumbs, breaking a wrist, dislocating his spine, twice wrecking the ligaments in his right knee and, worst of all, twice suffering fractured vertebrae... spinal injuries that threatened not only his sporting career, but a normal life.



Some would say Keith is taking loyalty too far to continue as a Rugby League player this long and I am sure his wife, Nova, has often wished he would put his boots away for the last time.

That loyalty has now been rewarded by Oldham who sought special permission from the Rugby League for Keith to have a testimonial 12 months early in view of his catalogue of injuries over the years.

In January this year the League gave its approval and Keith was naturally overjoyed.

"I can't believe how unlucky I have been with injuries, but I have had plenty of good times and my ambition now is to play in my own testimonial game. That would be something really special."

Keith made his senior debut for Oldham as one of ten reserves in a depleted Oldham side that was hammered 54-12 at Hull in 1985.

He was a substitute that day and he returned to the reserves until the following Spring when he played at full back in the last six senior games of the season after David Liddiard had returned home to Asutralia.

He managed eight senior games in 1986-7 then 14, 7, 23 and 19 in the following seasons.

Those figures would have been doubled or even trebled if he had not been one of the unluckiest players ever to wear an Oldham jersey.

Despite setbacks, there was no keeping Atky down and his most miraculous recovery of all came when he returned from a broken back to start a new career in the forwards because he had lost his speed as a result of broken legs and ankles.

To make it in the pack he had to put on weight and increase his upper body strength so, despite surgery on his spine, he set to work pumping iron in the gym.

He had to convince the coach of the time, Tony Barrow, that he was strong enough to play in the forwards and Tony was astounded at his courage.

His back problem had started at Wakefield in April, 1988 when Oldham won 32-22 to clinch their return to the first division in Eric Fitzsimon's first season in charge.

In scoring the winning try from the right-wing spot, Keith cracked a bone in his spine and that was to be the start of his serious spinal problems that would have finished most players.

Incredibly, he was back on first-team duty only five months later—the start of a long haul against adversity that will surely be recognised by the Watersheddings faithful.

Have a good testimonial Keith—you deserve it.

KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 7

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ATKY SAYS

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Already displaying all signs of a sports fanatic, Keith was first introduced to **Eric Fitzsimmons** at the school.

Eric, a sports teacher and semi-professional footballer and rugby league professional with Oldham and Hunslet, was to become a major influence on Keith during his time at Breezehill.

That influence is just as big today as it was all those years ago as Eric is now on the coaching staff at Oldham as **Peter Tunks'** right hand man.

Keith captained both the soccer and rugby league teams, although initially his main love was football.

There was a price to pay as his love of football and rugby affected his homework and school suffered as a result.

Matters came to a head in the second year when his mother was called into school to discuss Keith's work. An agreement was reached that Keith's work had to be satisfactory — or he could not play sport.

That meant detention during games. However even the best laid plans don't always work.

Keith remembers one incident that epitomised the dilemma he, and Eric, faced.

"One time I was in detention while the school was playing an important rugby league match against Fitton Hill, with Ian Sherratt starring for the opposition. Breezehill were being beaten at half time."

"Eric, who was running the school side, knew drastic action was needed. So he came along to the detention and said 'Keith Atkinson was now needed in the sports department, immediately'. I followed Eric and within five minutes was on the pitch trying to turn the match around."

In a contest between school work and sport there was only one winner.

He would rather be tackling on a football pitch or a rugby league field than doing homework. His success on the sports field was noticeable as he played for both rugby and football town teams. On the soccer pitch he was a stopper in the **Norman Hunter** mould. He appeared in the same town team as a young **Leo Casey**, who was later to become one of the favourites at the Watersheddings.

Despite this devotion to sport he still managed to leave school with three 'O' levels and three CSE Grade ones.

Looking back on those school days he feels he could have done better, but for his love of sport. However, he did discover his love of geography at school.

"The one subject I really liked at school was geography. It was everything to me. I first got interested at the age of seven. Even now I find geography totally fascinating. Fortunately I have had the opportunity to travel all over the world. I have been to Australia, Bali, Thailand, North America, all across Europe — I've seen much more of the world that I ever would have dreamt of when I was at school."

OPTIONS — SOCCER, MARINES OR RUGBY

When he left school, Keith found a job at the age of sixteen with the North West Water Authority as a reservoir assistant. He kept this job for a couple of years before he was made redundant. The job was purely a temporary measure while he decided on which career path to pursue.

He had three options.

One was to play football for Oldham Athletic. The Club had already shown interest with the then manager, **Jimmy Frizzle**, inviting Keith down to the Boundary Park to discuss the career opportunities with the Latics.

He had also considered joining the Royal Marines. The Royal Marines were a big attraction for a young man and offered him the chance to satisfy his love of travelling while working with the UK's elite.

His third option was to join Oldham Rugby League.

However, there was really no contest. Keith had set his heart on joining Oldham Rugby League as he had fallen in love with the game.

"It soon became clear that I wasn't going to make it as a professional footballer. As I got stockier so I became clumsier. Although I had shown promise as a youngster, this was no longer really apparent as an adult," says Keith.



In full flight against Fulham with a watchful eye on the opposing full back — notice too the Royal Marines haircut!

"I was already in love with Rugby League. The team spirit, the friends, the camaraderie. You couldn't beat that feeling. When you walked onto a Rugby League pitch you felt everyone on your side would die for you. Football couldn't match that."

"The allure of Rugby League meant that the marines was never really a serious consideration. Whenever I felt the urge to sign up with them, Rugby League was always pulling me back."

At the time Keith was having talks with Oldham, other Rugby League clubs had displayed interest too. Leigh, Swinton, St Helens and Rochdale were just four chasing his signature.

Keith had already earned a considerable reputation in the Rugby League circles as an aggressive goal kicking centre who could also play at full-back and on the wing. At seventeen he had played for Lancashire Colts alongside distinguished professionals like **Andy Platt**, now of Wigan, **Paul Round**, the popular Oldham forward now at Wakefield, and **Paul Forber**, the St Helens forward.

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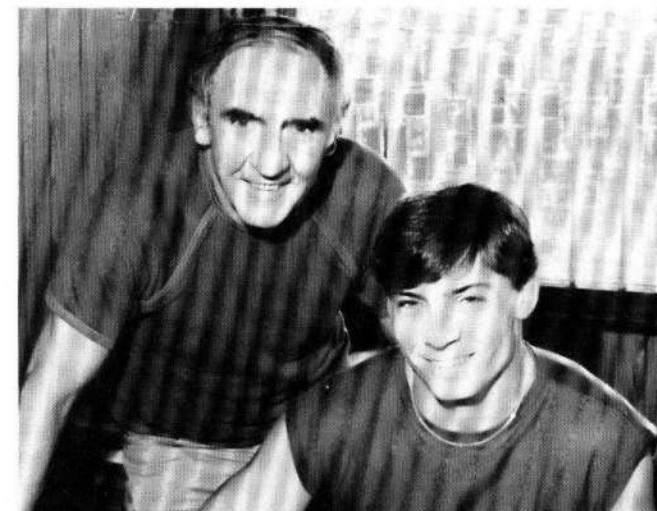
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Signing up — a young Keith puts pen to paper to pledge himself to Oldham. Coach Brian Gartland looks on.

If anybody deserves a great benefit it is you, Keith. After all, it only seems like yesterday when you came up to the club asking me if you could play for the colts.

I must admit that in the early days you were a very raw young rugby player but one who was prepared to put a lot of effort and hard work into his game to become a pro for his home town club.

This was the attitude that prompted me to put you forward for the Lancashire Colts for whom you had a great game and then you went onto play for Great Britain Colts against France.

I know how thrilled you were to represent your country. I was prompted to sign you on to fulfil your ambition to become a professional rugby league player for Oldham RLFC. You have done yourself, your family and Oldham RLFC proud. Congratulations.

Brian Gartland
Former Oldham coach



Classic action against Bradford in 1986

INTERNATIONAL HONOURS

The Lancashire side was coached by one of the Oldham coaches, **Brian Gartland**.

Impressed by the young Atkinson, Brian had recommended Keith for full international honours and he was selected for the GB Colts side to play in a match against France. Keith played twice alongside the outstanding **Lee Crooks**, who was already a fully fledged member of a Hull side that was the dominating force in the game in the UK at that time.

In the second of two games for the GB Colts Keith scored a try.

His lasting memory of those two internationals was of the outstanding performances from Andy Platt. Andy was an inspiration for Keith even then. Today he has nothing but admiration for the Wigan forward.

"That GB colts side was packed full of players who would make a great impact on the game in their later careers. Lee Crooks, Andy Platt, Paul Forber, **Keith England** and **Mark Conway** have all enjoyed distinguished careers in the game."

"As a back, I felt I contributed greatly to the English victories that season. I even scored a try in the second game, when I came in from the wing to collect a pass from Lee Crooks on the 25 yard line, I broke the tackle and put the ball down midway between the posts and the corner post."

"However, the outstanding aspect of that team was the domination of the forwards led by Andy Platt, who has since proved himself to be the model professional. Just look at the way he has played in Australia this summer. For any youngsters embarking on the game, if they want a role model to copy they should look no further than Andy Platt."

"I have never seen a player more committed or dedicated to the game. He works so hard that you wonder where he gets the energy from. His commitment is second to none and if I can achieve half what he has achieved in the game then I will be more than satisfied."

This success at county and international level had obviously drawn Keith to the attention of clubs throughout the League. Oldham were showing an interest. Brian Gartland as coach had recommended Keith to **Frank Myler**, the then Oldham Coach.

The only problem was that Keith had already made it obvious that he wanted to sign for Oldham.

"I made the mistake early on in my negotiations with Oldham that it was clear that I wanted to play for them and only them so they could pick and choose when they wanted me to sign and how much they wanted me to sign for."

SIGNING UP WITH OLDHAM

"Whenever a youngster is in negotiation with a Rugby League club, don't let your heart rule your head. Play it cool and don't give anything away. Although Oldham have treated my very well they had me by the short and curlies. Literally. They knew I wanted to play for them and that I would do it under their terms."

"That will help them negotiate a better contract on their terms. Fans may think that this sort of attitude is unfair to the club, but remember: a player has got to look after his interests as his career can often be short lived."

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Early action — Keith gets in entangled against Bradford Northern in the snow.

"Although the money side is important, it is not everything. I would have retired long ago if the game was solely about money. There is too much talk about money in the game at the moment."

"What we should really be concentrating on is the desire to play and the loyalty to your club, your fellow players and the fans who make the club tick."

"I have got a lot out of the game without ever being greedy or asking for more money than I could justify to myself. I have got a lovely house, a lovely car, a lovely family and go on holiday once a year. I also play for one of the best clubs in the country. The money side isn't my main priority."

"Although I look after my own interests, the loyalty to the club and the players and the fans comes first."

"I feel that this attitude has been rewarded by the club by putting my name forward for testimonial a year before it was due. I was approached by the Board who said if we can get a testimonial — do you want one? I was delighted to say yes and even more delighted that my loyalty to the club was being rewarded by the Directors."

A testimonial for years of dedicated service was the last thing on his mind when as a slim, stream lined, unmarked 18 year old he signed for Oldham with Brian Gartland looking over his shoulder.

Other professionals who signed with him at the same time were Oldham hooker, **Ian Sanderson**, now dedicating himself to the police force, and **Bob Marsden**, who played for Oldham before moving to local rivals Rochdale.

He realised his lifetime's ambition when he signed professional for the club at 19 in August 1984. He was delighted to have been given the opportunity of joining the club as a goalkicking centre who had the versatility to play on either the wing or as a fullback.

With the benefits of county and international honours already to his name, Keith could look forward to a bright future in the game. The rugby world really did lie at his feet.

As a Breezehill student Keith was a very promising soccer player — in fact he showed a good level of ability in everything in physical education.

However, it wasn't until I joined Failsworth that he began to earn a reputation as a League player, signing for Oldham as a Colt and gaining county and national honours in a short space of time.

Brian Gartland recognised Keith's potential and soon persuaded Frank Myler that there was another Atkinson worth having besides Oldham's main sponsor.

Watching Keith play during this time was like a breath of fresh air. He was full of enthusiasm and courage, despite his lack of experience at senior level. Wherever he played one couldn't fault 'Atky' for was real effort and commitment.

Keith fractured his lower vertebra in the Second Division Championship game against Wakefield in 1988. He had already experienced several bad injuries but this one capped the lot and I was worried about his prospects in what must be the most fierce body contact game in the world.

Four years later, another vertebra problem, numerous breaks and a plated arm, and Keith is already talking about when he gets back playing.

If anyone deserves good support during a testimonial it is Keith, who has more has earned his reward for sheer guts and determination.

Get well soon and have a great benefit year.

Eric Fitzsimmons
Assistant Coach, Oldham RLFC



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INJURIES, INJURIES & MORE INJURIES

Sadly, his career since those joyous days in August 1984 has been dramatically hindered by a catalogue of injuries that would have forced most players, no matter how brave, out of the game.

The list of injuries he has sustained are quite frightening. He has twice broken his right leg. He has smashed his right ankle. He has fractured both his thumbs and broken a wrist. Twice the ligaments in his knee had been wrecked and he has also dislocated his spine. The worst injuries of all have been the fractured vertebrae in his back. The back injury was not a one off — he has actually done it twice. These sorts of injuries not only threaten a career but also a normal everyday existence.

Keith reckons he has lost at least four years of his career through injury.

Now with this horrendous list of injuries behind him, he is mature enough to face up to the fact that his body will be permanently damaged by too many broken bones!

"If when I first started out in the game I had realised I would pick up so many horrific injuries I would have thought twice about picking Rugby League as a career," comments a reflective Keith.

"There have been times over the last six, seven or eight years when I have had to endure great financial difficulties through injuries with me unable to work. **Nova**, my wife, has been a jewel and her support has made the heartache of these times less painful."

Despite all his injuries, Keith says that is down to the risks of playing the game.

"Picking up injuries are part and parcel of the hardest contact sport game ever played in the world."

"If a player goes through his career without picking up a serious injury then he is an extremely fortunate. **Mal Meninga**, **Paul Laughlin** and our own **Shane Tupaea** have all had serious breaks in their arms, just like mine."

"My bad luck cannot last forever and I am looking forward to the forthcoming season so that I can remain free from injury and catch up on lost time."

Of all the injuries Keith has suffered, two stick out in his memory.

"We were playing Carlisle. I had already had a horrendous season with injuries including a detached retina, pulled achilles, broken leg and ankle and to cap it all a shattered left arm! I had gone into a tackle and unfortunately come out second best. **Richard Pachniuk** had tackled one of the opposition and I was running in to finish the job off. As

Stopped in action...in more ways than one as the stretcher is brought on yet again.

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The longest walk — Keith accompanied by John Watkin after smashing his arm last season.

I arrived the Carlisle player ducked and my left arm caught the top of his head. As I fell to the ground in agony Richard was shouting out 'I heard it crack, I heard it crack!'

'I WANTED TO BE SICK'

"John Watkins was on the pitch as quick as a flash and Richard was shouting out to him, 'It's broken, I heard the crack'. I was in absolute agony, I had never known pain like it. All I wanted to do was be sick. John Watkins said to me 'get up and walk off the pitch with dignity'. Thanks John!"

"I mustered as much dignity as I possibly could despite the overwhelming desire just to put my head between my knees and vomit. I left the pitch after what seemed like one of the longest walks of my life and was soon back to my second home, Highfield Hospital, where I am on first name terms with the vast majority of the staff."

Keith's worst injury of all was his second broken back.

It happened in an A Team game, his comeback after fracturing his back. Ian Bates's older brother, tackled Keith around the bottom of the back. Keith never felt anything although he heard the crack.

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"I didn't feel any pain or anything. Once I had heard the crack everything appeared to be going in slow motion. I went to move my legs. Nothing. I felt like I was being stood in a bucket of cement. I was paralysed in my legs for over seventeen days. I had never been so frightened in my life."

"Even when I think about it today, it still frightens me. However, the surgeon who operated on me said it wasn't the first time that a sportsman could recover from this injury. **Joe Royal**, Oldham's Manager, had done so. People can play again after receiving bad injuries to the spine. All the surgeon needed to do was to convince me that it wouldn't happen again. There may be long term problems with the back, but at the moment it feels fine."

Without question, severe injuries have so far prevented Keith from fulfilling his full potential in the game.

A look at his record having joined Oldham in 1984 highlights the lost years.



Keith's second home — and seeing double at Highfield Hospital

He made his debut as one of ten reserves in Oldham's side that was hammered 54-12 at home to Hull. He came on as substitute wearing the number 15 shirt (that he has since come to regard as his own over the years with Oldham). He returned to the reserves after this and there he stayed until the following Spring when Australian fullback, **David Liddiard**, returned Down Under. Keith, who had played wing and centre most of his career, then took over as fullback. He managed eight senior games in 1986/87, 14 in 1987/88, seven in 1988/89, 23 in 1989/90 and 19 in 1991.

His appalling list of injuries had cost him nearly five seasons in the game. Even now at the age of 27 he views himself as an apprentice learning the game.

STILL LEARNING

"I may be one of the senior players at the club in the second half of my twenties, but I feel as if I am still learning the game. In reality, I am 23, having missed a lot of my career through injury."

"I am still learning the game and enjoying my rugby league education. I feel I can improve even more and am looking forward to the forthcoming season when I can really get down to hard work, building up my confidence and proving to everyone that I am a player who can stay free of injury and contribute a lot to a young Oldham side that will return to the first division and will become one of the top sides in the country."

Where as many players would have been put off by the injuries, Keith blossomed in adversity.

A dislocated spine couldn't prevent him getting married to girlfriend Nova. On February 3rd three years ago he had dislocated his spine less than three weeks before he was due to get married.

Four days later, he had an operation on his spine to remove a disc and insert a pin into his spine.

Most people would have taken the hint and stayed in hospital recuperating from such a major operation. But not Keith.

"Everything had been arranged for the reception and the evening meal. I had a long time out of the game and was skint. The club had come in and helped pay for everything for the wedding. I was not going to miss this even if it meant arriving at the church on crutches, which is exactly what I did!"

Less than a week after his operation he was at the altar getting married at St Thomas's Church in Moorside. The ceremony was a delight. The only problem was that once he had knelt down he couldn't get back up again. It took the best man, brother-in-law **Dave Lees**, and several others to lift him back to his feet.

Keith spent his honeymoon where he had spent a lot of his time over the last ten years, back in Highfield Hospital.

"After the wedding there was only one place I was going and that was straight back to hospital."

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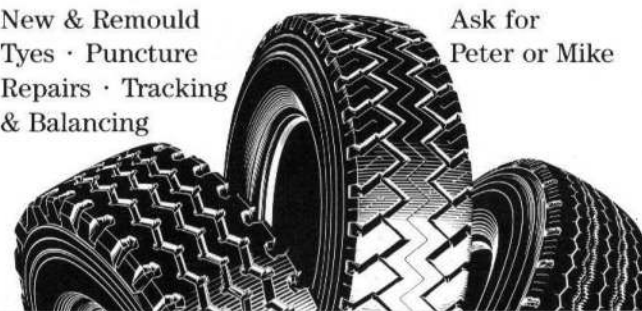
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"Unfortunately, that meant Nova couldn't go on honeymoon. But hopefully we have made up for it since with travelling all over the world," said Keith, who has just returned from Africa.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

The outstanding highlights that will forever remain in Keith's memory are the two Silk Cut Challenge Cup semi-finals in 1989/90 and 1990/91 when they played Warrington and Wigan respectively.

The first match, especially, against Warrington was one which almost saw Oldham's Wembley dream finally come true. Keith takes up the story.

"The Warrington game was the biggest game of all our lives. This was the one game we knew we could really beat the opposition."

"Tony Barrow had us so well drilled and so fit that there was no reason why we couldn't beat them. Even though we were in the second division we were a very, very good side. It was going to be a close match — one which we could win."

"I remember driving towards Central Park and suddenly 'Simply the Best', the Club record, came over the coach's PA system. You could feel the atmosphere in the coach change. Now there was no turning back."

"I felt the hair standing on the back of my neck. The beat of 'Simply the Best' and the chorus set the pulses racing. It felt magic. We were almost at the pinnacle of every rugby league player's ambition. A trip to Wembley. I didn't want it to end."

The current side which Tony Barrow had assembled from **Duncan Platt** at fullback to **Richard Irving** and **Paul Lord** on the wings, **Des Foy** and **John Henderson** as centres, **Brett Clark** and **Mike Ford** at half back to the forwards with **Richard Russell**, **Leo Casey**, **Keith Newton**, **Sean Allen**, **John Fieldhouse** and **John Cogger**, was one of the strongest in recent years.

Keith was on the bench alongside **John Fairbank** with players like **Charlie McAlister**, **Paul Round** and **Andy Ruane** unable even to get in the side.

"The match was as tight as we had all expected it to be. We matched them move for move, tackle for tackle, effort for effort."

"The heat that day was intense and Sean Allen and Keith Newton in the second row were shattered."

"Tony's one mistake on the day was to leave the substitutions too late. Warrington scored a couple of tries resulting from a lack of cover as tired players started to create gaps. After half time we were chasing the game. Warrington's two tries just showed you how cruel rugby league can be. We appeared to be on top and yet they hit us from nowhere."

"Once Warrington had established their lead, they hung on like crazy."

"We almost scored in the last dying seconds of the game when Mike Ford did a short chip to the corner. Paul Lord touched down, but the referee gave offside. All the players, myself included, were absolutely gutted. We felt robbed. Our dream of going to Wembley was over."

"In the dressing room after the game players were crying, shouting abuse. They wanted to be left in peace. To deal with the tragedy of defeat in their own way. People were coming

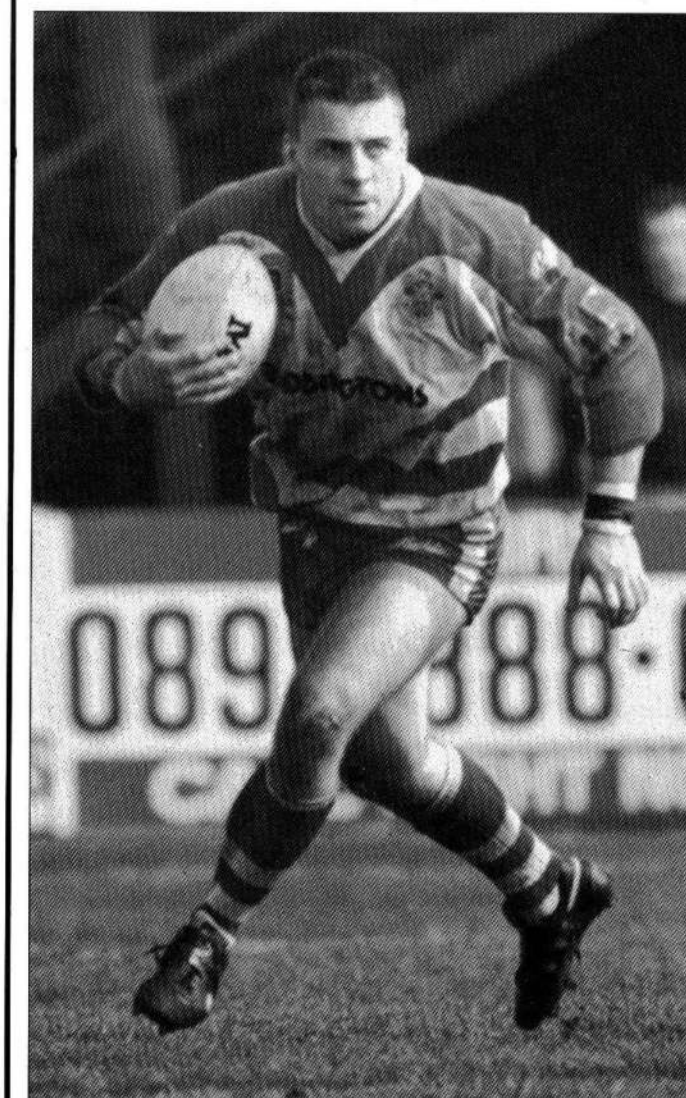
Keith Atkinson is without a shadow of doubt the gutsiest player I have ever had the pleasure to coach. With all his bad luck and horrific injuries many a man would have packed in the game long ago — but not Keith.

His dedication, fitness and love for all things Oldham RLFC, is a credit to him and Rugby League in general — if there were more players in the mould of Keith we would have a much healthier game.

When I arrived at Oldham Keith was a goal kicking full back; within three months I moved him into the pack and he became one of the best second row forwards in the club. His energy, determination and will to win is a great asset needed with more players in the club.

Finally, I would like to wish Keith and his family health, wealth and prosperity and I am positive the best fans in Rugby League will support you during your testimonial year.

Tony Barrow
Former Warrington, Oldham coach now with Swinton



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into the dressing room for interviews and were told in no uncertain terms where to go."

"We got through to the semi-final again the following year. This time we were playing the invincible Wigan. The previous year we felt we had a chance of beating Warrington, but I think to actually beat Wigan we would need to catch them on a very, very bad off day. Sadly that was not to be and Wigan marched onto a four consecutive Wembley victory."

"Unfortunately, with those two semi-finals I think my chances of ever playing at Wembley are now gone."

"To make matters worse, I have missed three premierships at Old Trafford through injury. The games were against Featherstone Rovers, Hull KR and Sheffield Eagles which I would have dearly loved to have played, passed me by through injury."

"The first time I missed a premiership hurt me badly. The second ripped the heart out of me, I was absolutely gutted, by the third time last seasons match against Sheffield Eagles I had got past the hurting stage."

OLD TRAFFORD AMBITION

"If I was to think about the one place I would like to crown my rugby League career, it would be in a premiership final at Old Trafford."

"I am sure that next season we will be one of the top sides in the second division and that an Old Trafford premiership final is more a reality than a dream. I would consider it one of the greatest honours I could have in the game to play there."

One of Keith's biggest influences in the game has to be coach, Tony Barrow.

It was Tony who convinced Keith to give up playing in the centre once ankle and leg injuries had rid him of his speed and pace and move into the forwards.

Keith took the advice and started to build up his body and weight to take on this new challenge with his usual enthusiasm.

Despite Tony Barrow's encouragement and advice, Keith still had to actually prove he could play in the forwards and that he was fully recovered from injury. Tony Barrow never compromised. Nowadays Keith has nothing but admiration for Tony Barrow, who will be coaching Swinton in the Second Division this coming season.

"Tony Barrow had a great rapport with fans and players alike. Rugby league is a funny game. When the team wins, the players get the credit and yet when they lose the coach gets the blame."

"Tony achieved a lot at the club. He took us through to a semi-final in the Challenge Cup against Warrington. We made it through to the final of the Lancashire Cup again, against Warrington. We won promotion to the first division and contested a thrilling premiership final against Hull KR. Tony was on the verge of achieving great things with Oldham."

"Unfortunately injuries and some players let him down."

"Tony Barrow was a most domineering and frightening coach. He had my respect and I am sure he would have turned Oldham into a major force if the club had stayed free of injury. He constantly gave me good advice and I count Tony as a close friend now."

"If there is one criticism I would lay at Tony it was his choice of coaching staff. Towards the end of his reign at the club, the training became stagnant and boring. When that happens, players start to get demotivated."

"The season that saw us go down to the second division and which saw Tony Barrow leave the club, was one where we were plagued by bad luck. We had started well during the season and looked like we could have achieved survival quite easily."

"We hadn't played badly all season, and yet we ended up





Atkinson sponsored by Atkinson in the driving seat against Leigh.

I first bumped into Keith-literally-when he was at Breezehill School and I was playing for Saddleworth. We were playing at U15 level and even then, at that early age, Keith was a hard, bruising lad. The next time we came up against each other was when I was playing for Wigan Colts and Keith was with Oldham Colts. We played opposite each other at stand off-and had a bit of a scuffle, which is out of character for Keith.

When I heard that Keith had signed for Oldham I was surprised because he hadn't been particularly outstanding at school. However, he did well to get signed, early proof of his determination and courage that have characterised his career ever since.

When I signed for Oldham after my spell with Wigan Keith was just breaking through to the first team-and starting to compile a horrendous catalogue of injuries. If I had suffered half the injuries he has had to endure I would have called it a day there and then.

By the end of the 1990-91 season with John Fieldhouse in charge, Keith was playing his best rugby ever. He'd moved position into the forwards, which suited his hard, determined character who never shirked or hid on the pitch.

When the going got tough you could always rely on Keith to 'tough' it out with you. Stuck on your goal line? Keith would be the one lining up to drive out. Other players may have been more skilful for character and determination few could match Keith.

Enjoy your testimonial. Make it one to remember!

Mike Ford
Wigan, Oldham & Castleford, GB Tourist

going down just because of one point. If we had won one more game we would have stayed up and things could have turned out completely differently."

"At home our biggest defeat was the 24-16 loss to Widnes. We lost to St Helens by a couple of points. Featherstone Rovers beat us at home only when they were allowed to get up from a tackle and continue with the game which lead to a try. If the referee had been on the ball on that occasion, who knows we could still be in the first division now and Tony could still be at the helm."

"The side was good enough. Our last game against Hull, who had been chasing the title all season. It showed what a good side we were. We didn't just beat them, we outplayed them off the Park. All the commitment and the skill that we knew was there was shown in this last game."

"The side and the players in the side created their own problems by not following the game plans that Tony had given us. If we had stuck to our game plan instead of playing one-man rugby, we would have been in a much stronger position in the League."

"Unfortunately for Tony he ran out of sticks to beat the players with. With so many injuries he could no longer drop people who did not work to his game plan. Unfortunately, the club forced him out."

John Fieldhouse took over and valiantly tried to keep the club up, but he was nervous of his new responsibility.

PUNCHING PETER TUNKS...AND LIVING TO TELL THE TALE

When Oldham got demoted to the second division, Australian coach, **Peter Tunks**, was hired by the Club.

Again, Peter, like Tony, is a man that Keith had nothing but admiration for.

"I remember punching Tunks once in a match against Sheffield — and living to tell the tale. Peter was one of the top forwards in the world in his day. He was a tough uncompromising Aussie who had played at the highest level."

"I just had to have a go and I remember having a dig as he was being tackled. When Peter got up he just winked at me and smiled. Peter and I can laugh about the incident now. In fact he tells me that I impressed him by the way I kept going at him non-stop."

"As I said, Peter was one of the best forward players in the world when he was at his peak. Now that experience that he has got under his belt, can help all of us at Oldham to improve our game. What's more a player that has played at that standard knows exactly how to make us achieve the same."

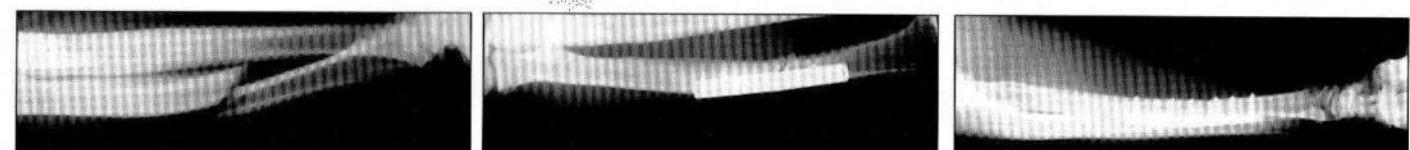
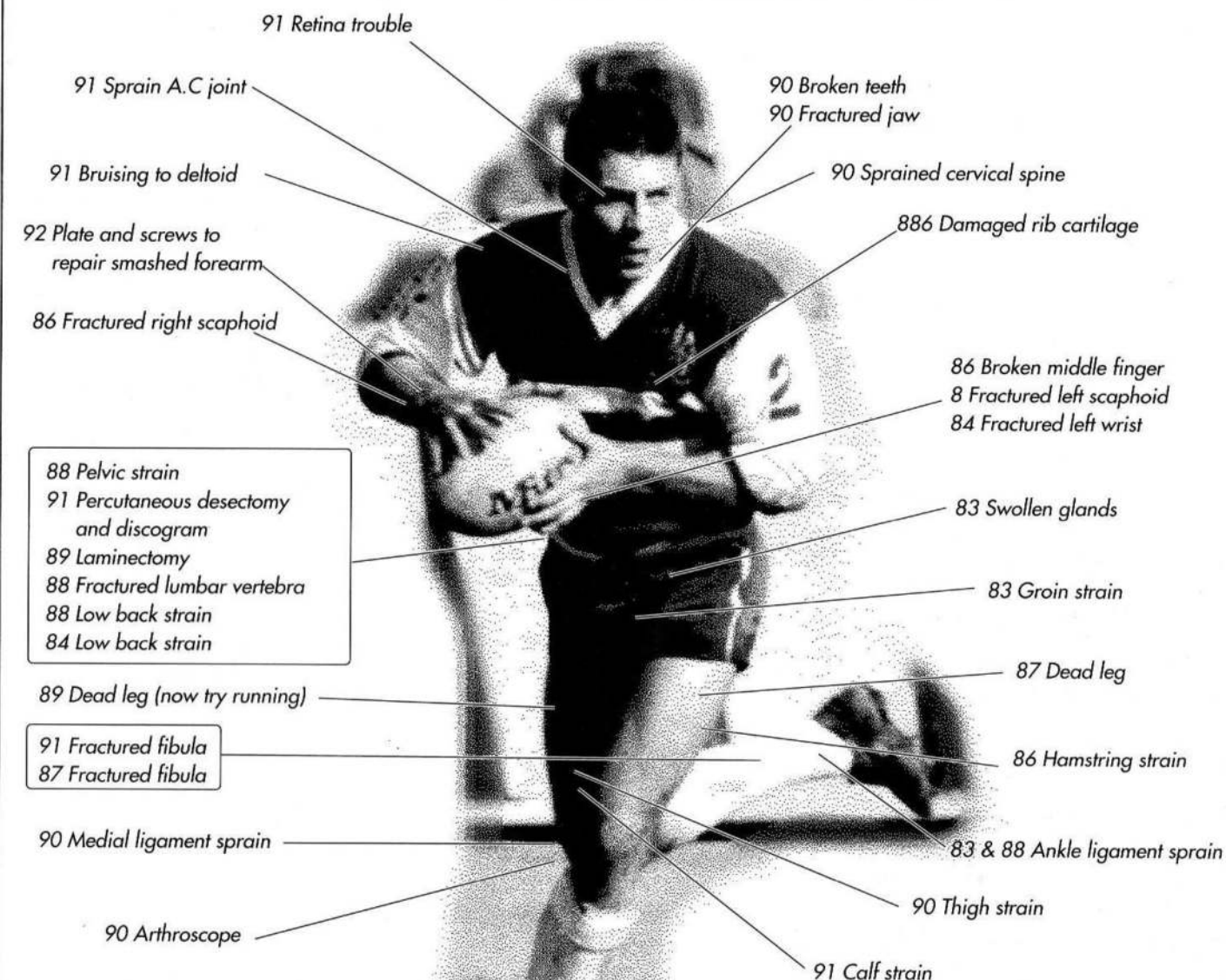
Keith impressed Peter with his ferocious tackling and all out commitment on the pitch although 'Atky' is the first to acknowledge that once the game is over, there are no carrying on vendettas off the pitch.

"On the pitch, you can be best of enemies. Once the whistle has blown for the final time then you are best of friends again."

Keith has found the transition to the forwards from the backs a lot harder than he had ever anticipated. And although it is a move that he never ever regretted - his most memorable try was scored as a back!

INJURIES

Unlucky with injuries or does Keith just like hospital food. Here we take a painful look - ouch!—at the break, sprains, aches and pains that have afflicted Keith during his Oldham career. Ouch again!



"If when I first started out in the game I had realised I would pick up so many horrific injuries I would have thought twice about picking Rugby League as a career."

Keith Atkinson, 1992.

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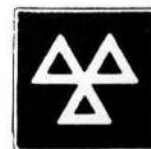


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P. MATHEWS

"The best try I ever scored was in 1987 when we were playing Leeds at home. It was all down to speed — which is one thing I no longer have! After just three minutes I took the ball from the scrum from Gary Warnecke. And out sprinted Gary Schofield, who was a lot faster than he is now, Carl Gibson, and Ian Wilkinson to score. To out sprint those three while playing fullback was a real buzz."

However, it is in the forwards that he feels he has really come of age. "Although it is ten times harder in the forwards, I absolutely adore playing in the pack. You are always in the heat of the battle, waging the war upfront. Forwards win games. I am a naturally aggressive person, however, I am learning to control that aggression and channel it to the benefit of my game."

Keith has a reputation like Oldham forward **Tim Street** as being a player who can fly off the handle. Despite this, he has only ever been sent off once in his career.

This was in a match against Huddersfield in the Regal Trophy when a certain **Simon Kenworthy** bit his finger.

Keith's immediate reaction was to hit out as this was no usual bite. Kenworthy's teeth had bitten through to the bone and Keith instinctively hit out. With Kenworthy flat out Keith got his marching orders. Ironically, the Rugby League disciplinary hearing found him not guilty and took no further action against him as the video gave the impression of Keith merely pushing away Kenworthy.

Although rugby league is a violent contact sport game, Keith feels that most players play it fairly. There are no deliberate attempts to injure fellow professionals. Although players go in hard he feels this is the tactic needed to win the game.

"Nine times out of ten nobody means any harm on the pitch, even when other players get hurt."

"You must remember that every player on a team is out to keep his place. Your opponent, your opposing prop, is

competing against you. He is out to put you off your game just as you are out to put him off his. By achieving this you are helping to keep your place in the side and help keep your side on top."

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

"All players have different ways of doing things. Some players will punch you, some will bite, some will gauge. Others will try and rile you by talking. Players with the skill, like **Andy Gregory** from Wigan, will take the mickey out of you by making you look foolish on the pitch."

"Another breed of player will try and get you sent off. They will take a dive when there is now way they have been hit. Although I don't condone this sort of behaviour it happens in the game. I feel it is very much part and parcel of rugby league."

"Remember, people pay good money to be entertained. Rugby league is really entertainment. It is a Broadway Show. It's an act. People want their excitement, they want to get vocal on the terraces. They want to shout at referees bad decisions, they like the controversy."

"I suppose the part of the game I really love is the big hit. I like to hurt people in tackles."

"The night before a game I will concentrate on go into myself and I mentally prepare myself for the game. The one aim at the beginning of a match is to make sure that the first tackle is a big tackle. A pile driver, if you like."

"I would also always try and make sure that I drive the ball in at least one set of six. It is hard work. But it is worth every bit of pain and agony. After a while you don't feel the pain. You get your second wind, the legs stop aching and you just carry on playing and playing and playing for your team mates and the crowd."



Crunch! Keith is sandwiched between two Swinton players with current teammate Shane Tupaea (head guard) providing the topping.

Keith has another string to his game besides his tackling and unwavering commitment. He's one of the best goal kickers at the club thanks to the years spent playing football.

RAPPORT WITH CROWD

"My kicking ability goes back to football. Eric Fitzsimmons, a semi-pro footballer, was a superb goalkicker. Kicking is all about confidence. Sometimes you can get six out of six-and-a-half and the next half you can get none out of six. It all depends on how you feel. I once remember scoring fourteen out of fourteen in a match."

"I enjoy the rapport with the crowd. Once I was playing in an 'A' team game, I scored eight out of eight. Then in the last minute I missed one. I hid my face in shame and the crowd enjoyed the joke."

Keith follows the same routine each time he kicks the ball.

"I place the ball, stand and estimate the distance to the post. I take five strides back, two to the right side, clean my boots, take a couple of deep breaths and walk into the ball. I rely on timing for my accuracy and distance. I hit with the inside of my foot, unlike other players who will toe-poke it. Kicking is very much like golf. It is a matter of consistency and timing, hit it well and it will go well."

Unlike many players Keith never suffers from nerves — when he kicking, preparing for a big match, or teeing up on a golf course (a sport that is equally passionate about!).



Keith is recognised as one of the club's most consistent kickers.



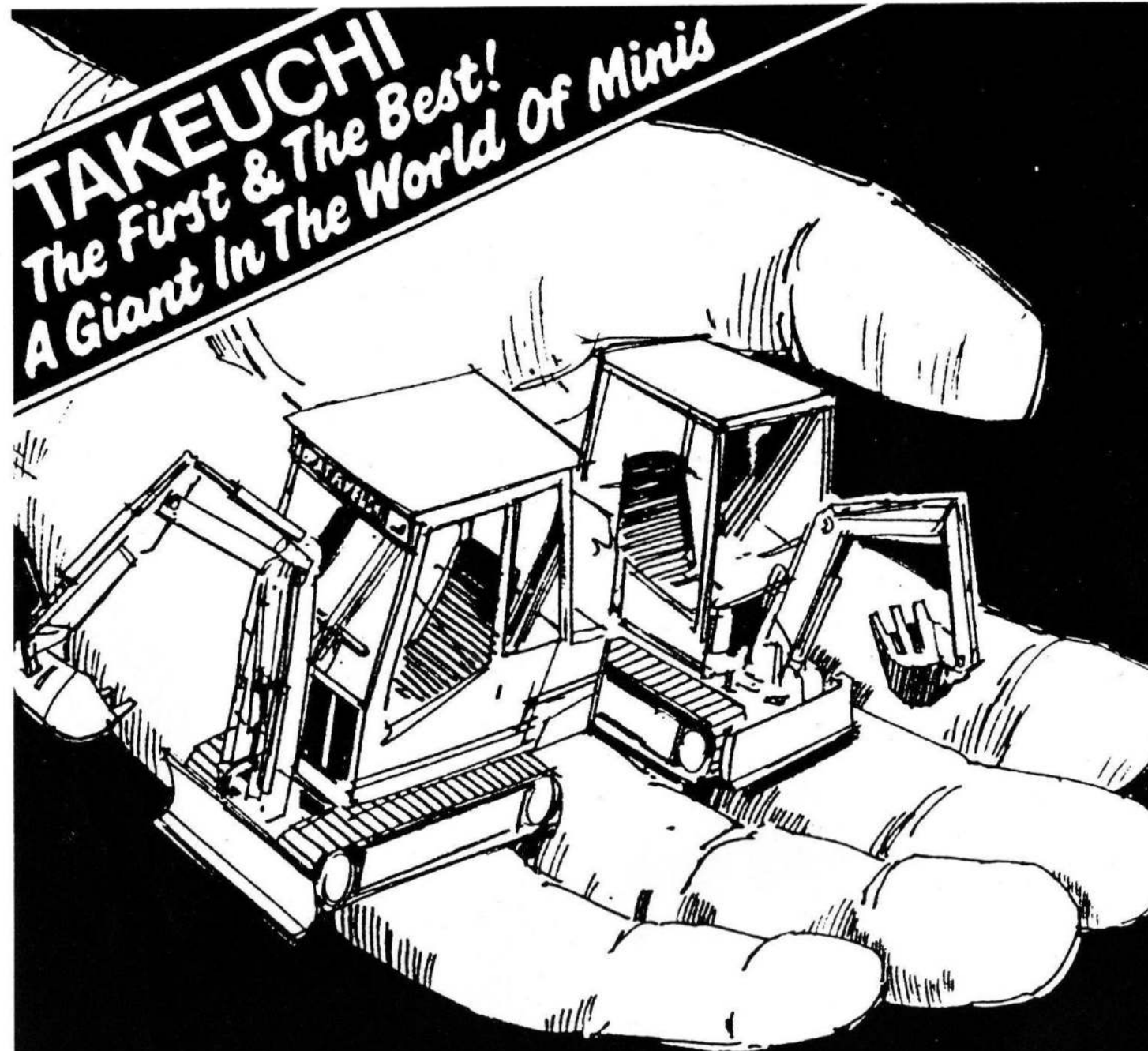
Five steps back, two to the right...and we have contact — and two more points.

"I never feel that nervous before a match as my adrenalin is flowing I can't wait to get started. But you will be surprised at the number of players queuing for the toilets just before kick-off. I remember **Terry Flanagan** used to drink a quarter bottle of sherry before a game to help clear his chest. **Des Foy**, on the other hand, would always be in the toilets until five minutes before the match."

"In contrast, Duncan Platt hasn't got a care in the world. He is so cool and dry. I suppose it doesn't matter what you do beforehand that counts. It's what happens on the pitch."

Although Keith has been encouraged by many to retire from the game because of his incredible misfortune with injuries, he has only considered it a couple of times.

In fact, in April 1992 with the pains from yet another back



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KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 32



12 HOUR RETIREMENT

He did in fact retire after he had broken his arm in March. He takes up the story in hospital.

"I was lying in a hospital bed caked in mud, still in my kit. They were about to insert a plate into my smashed arm. I was still in absolute agony and pain and was wondering if this was really worth all the effort and the hassle and the aggravation?"

"I said to my wife, Nova, who was beside me, 'this is it, I will call it a day. It's not fair on you, Sally-Anne or anyone else.' I honestly meant it as I was wheeled down to the operating theatre."

"After the operation though, my mood had changed. I was lying in the hospital bed at 3 a.m. in the morning thinking about other players who had recovered from the operation; players like Mel Meninga, Sean Tupaea and Paul Laughlin had all recovered from similar injuries. I thought to myself, it's only a broken arm, and instantly regretted my decision to tell Nova I had retired."

"Being an impulsive character, I telephoned her and said 'I'm sorry love I'm not retiring yet!'"

So Keith did actually retire — even if it was only for half a day. But then he is the eternal optimist. Over the past couple

of years, when the injuries have really been piled on, he has learned not to look back and moan about what could have been.

"Players who I have played internationally at Colt level have since been capped with the GB International Squad. Lee Crooks, Andy Platt spring to mind. They are currently touring in Australia."

"Could I have made the grade at that level if I have stayed injury free? It is a question that will probably never be answered because I was injured and my career was hindered by these injuries."

"Whatever the answer, I am looking forward like never before to the coming season. I feel I deserve a big season, one where I can show everyone exactly what Keith Atkinson can do. On my day I think I can compare with any forward in the country. How I perform is down to me. It is down to my commitment. It is down to my preparation and it is down to my attitude. If I get injured again that is a cross I will have to bear."

"I intend to enjoy my testimonial year. Hopefully by playing in the first team, helping Oldham to get promotion into the first division where they belong and also helping them to achieve success in the cup competitions. I intend also to enjoy my testimonial year socially, by mixing and enjoying the social life that is such an important element of this sporting life I lead."



Keith enjoys the sweet smell of success after the championship winning game against Wakefield in 1989 — little realising he's walking off with a broken back.

KEITH ATKINSON TESTIMONIAL 33



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Richard Russell



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KEITH'S SPECIAL AWARDS

Keith, in a generous mood, has announced the following, absolutely no offence intended for any of the lucky winners!

Curry eating beyond all acceptable human levels of endurance award Ian Sherratt

The Willie Wonka Chocolate Factory eating award Paul Round

Mr Dynamic on the training pitch award Richard Irving

The special VIZ Johnny F*ts award** Richard Russell

More Royal than Charles and Di award and happily married too Duncan Platt

The double vision this beer was made for drinking, drinking and drinking (belch) award Tim Street-Ian Sherratt

The Christian Dior award for fashion victims beyond help Peter Tunks

It's my ball and I am taking it home award for sulking Vince Nicklin

It's my ball and I am taking it home award for sulking (runner up) Andy Ruane

Special law & order award (sorry) Tim Street & Keith Atkinson

Snorers anonymous (unless you share the same hotel) Paul Round, Austin Donegan, Charlie McAlister

Hello Keith, long time no see award Staff at the Highfield Hospital

Smile you're on SKY TV and you're getting paid Mike Ford

The Ellery Hanley award for non-stop talking Keith Newton

Smile you're on Rugby League Live not the Clothes Shop award Peter Tunks

Two out of three ain't bad award for impersonating as overweight rock star Shaun Allen

Watch out Linford Christie here comes John Watkin with the sponge award John Watkin

Watch John Watkin here comes Atkinson with a dead leg Keith Atkinson

You lot would be bloody dropped if they weren't injured award

All losing coaches at 4.30 on Sunday

The Simply the Best award for supporters For anyone and everyone who ever stood on the terraces at Watersheddings.

A BIG THANK YOU TO YOU ALL!



First of all, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my lovely wife, Nova, who has been absolutely terrific throughout my career. She is a lovely lady and I am so glad she is my wife.

She takes everything with a pinch of salt and tells me when I really want to retire, tell me then. She knows more than anyone else what the game means to me and I appreciate her all the more for her understanding.

There have been hard times in the Atkinson household, a lot of upset. Financially we have been close to the edge on several occasions. Throughout it all Nova has always been there to help me. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

She is my best friend, my wife and a lot more. Thank you.

My next big thank you is for the other woman in my life — our little girl, Sally-Anne, who is three years old and is the greatest thing that has happened to me in my life. She is a lovely little girl and I am proud that I have had the chance to see her grow up. She is starting to watch the games now and hopefully I can make her equally proud on the pitch.

I would also like to thank all my family, especially my mother Doreen, and my brother and sister and all my relatives for their support over the years during my time with Oldham. It has been a long tough journey riding in this sporting life but it would be a lot tougher and a lot harder without their support. Thank you.

I would also like to thank all the first and second team coaches at Oldham who have guided me throughout my career at Oldham. I've learnt from everyone of you and appreciate the time you've all spent with me to help me become a better player.

The same goes to all the great players I have had the pleasure to play with. Thanks for the great memories — on and off the pitch!

I also wish to thank my benefit committee for making my testimonial year an exciting reality, the advertisers and contributors who made this publication possible and Oldham RLFC and its staff, whose help have been much appreciated.

And finally, an extra big thank you to you, the loyal supporters, for buying this brochure and supporting me during my benefit year.

It has been a pleasure and privilege to play in front of the game's best, most knowledgeable and loyal fans.

Thank you. All of you. And thanks in advance for your support throughout the coming year.

All the best

Keith Atkinson.